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UNCLAS ROME 003680

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SUBJECT: PM BERLUSCONI WILL ALSO REMAIN FM BERLUSCONI "FOR A FEW MORE MONTHS"

REF: A) ROME 03651 B) ROME 3600

1. (SBU) DESPITE PUBLIC AND PRIVATE MUSINGS FROM VARIOUS SOURCES IN THE GOI (REPORTED REFTELS), PM BERLUSCONI WILL NOT RELINQUISH HIS POST AS INTERIM FOREIGN MINISTER ANY TIME
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SOON. REFTELS REPORTED THAT THE PM WAS LIKELY TO ANNOUNCE SOON THE APPOINTMENT OF CURRENT MINISTER FOR PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION AND SECURITY FRANCO FRATTINI AS FOREIGN MINISTER.

2. (U) DURING HIS ADDRESS TO A CONFERENCE FOR ITALIAN AMBASSADORS IN ROME ON JULY 24, HOWEVER, BERLUSCONI SAID THAT HE WOULD KEEP THE MFA INTERIM POST "FOR A FEW MORE MONTHS, OR MAYBE EVEN LONGER." HE EXPLAINED THAT HE IS THE HEAD OF A COALITION GOVERNMENT, AND THAT "WITHIN THIS COALITION, THE CONDITIONS TO APPOINT A NEW FOREIGN MINISTER HAVE NOT YET RIPENED." BERLUSCONI ASSURED THE AMBASSADORS THAT HE WOULD TRY TO BE "MORE PRESENT, MORE UP TO THE TASK, TO MEET YOUR EXPECTATIONS." HE ALSO ADMITTED THAT WHEN THE TIME FINALLY COMES TO GIVE UP THE MFA, HE WILL MISS THE JOB.

3. (SBU) COMMENT. IN CITING THE COALITION GOVERNMENT AS THE REASON FOR DELAYING HIS DECISION ON A NEW FM, BERLUSCONI PROBABLY HAD IN MIND THE FACT THAT GIVING FRATTINI THE MFA WOULD MEAN THAT THE MOST IMPORTANT GOVERNMENT MINISTRIES (FOREIGN AFFAIRS, DEFENSE, ECONOMY, AND INTERIOR) WOULD BE RUN BY FORZA ITALIA (FI - BERLUSCONI'S PARTY) MEMBERS. WE UNDERSTAND THAT THE CHRISTIAN DEMOCRATS IN THE COALITION, IN PARTICULAR, ARE PUSHING FOR MORE POSITIONS. THIS DOES NOT BODE WELL FOR FRATTINI'S CHANCES. THE RELATIVE STRENGTHS OF THE PARTIES COMPRISING THE COALITION WILL NOT CHANGE OVER THE NEXT FEW MONTHS. BARRING A MAJOR SHUFFLE IN THE CABINET (SOMETHING BERLUSCONI HAS SAID HE IS RELUCTANT TO DO), IT MAY BE THAT BERLUSCONI IS STALLING FOR TIME TO CAST HIS NET WIDER IN THE SEARCH FOR A CAPABLE AND, FROM PARLIAMENT'S STANDPOINT, ACCEPTABLE FM.

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4. (SBU) COMMENT CONTINUED. DESPITE BERLUSCONI'S PROMISE TO BE MORE VISIBLE AT THE MFA, IT WILL BECOME INCREASINGLY DIFFICULT FOR HIM TO HANDLE BOTH THE PM AND FM JOBS EFFECTIVELY. "A FEW MORE MONTHS" MEANS HE WILL RETAIN THE FM POSITION AT LEAST UNTIL JUST BEFORE, OR THROUGH, THE NATO SUMMIT IN PRAGUE. GIVEN THE DETAILS TO BE HAMMERED OUT ON ENLARGEMENT IN THE RUN-UP TO PRAGUE, THE LACK OF A FULL TIME FM COULD BE PROBLEMATIC FOR THE GOI. IN ADDITION, THE MFA HAS STARTED PREPARATIONS FOR ITALY'S EU PRESIDENCY IN JULY 2003. BERLUSCONI MAY FIND THAT THE BURDEN OF TWO CABINET POSITIONS WILL FORCE HIM TO EXPEDITE HIS CHOICE FOR FM. RESPECTED MEDIA ANALYSTS ARE INCREASINGLY SUGGESTING JUST THIS.
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